

Monsters, feral teens and the rage to feel alive

David Taransaud believes we must sensitively act as hostage negotiators, using creative means to make contact with adolescents' Wounded Self

From the beginning of time, the myth of the monster has pervaded most cultures. Creatures from folklore, such as werewolves, vampires, and gorgons, were the embodiment of society's deepest fears, threatening the moral fabric so carefully woven by our ancestors. Nowadays, the monster myth has been deconstructed and diluted, romanticised through cinema, TV series, video games and urban fantasy novels. The 21st-century monster is no longer to be feared, yet many of us believe a far more dangerous creature lurks among us: the feral adolescent.

According to the media, since the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993, our society has been plagued by a new type of predatory creature: the subhuman teen monster, the transgressor of moral rules, the wild and uncivilised hooded demon.

The word 'youth', in the press and in the public imagination, seems to have become synonymous with senseless violent crime and street terror. Indeed, research shows that some of the most commonly used words to describe adolescents in the media include *feral*, *monsters*, *inhuman*, and *evil*.

Undoubtedly, sensationalism and the demonisation of youth sell newspapers, but these labels obfuscate the truth and only succeed in deepening our fears. If we really want to get to the heart of the problem, we need to embark on a more refined exploration of the teen-monster myth. Only then will we be able to map, negotiate and navigate the inner territory of the troubled teen. It is only by venturing into the inner lair of the so-called feral adolescent that we stand a chance of safely uncovering the deep hurt that lies beneath his antisocial persona.

Into the monster's lair

It is no coincidence that monsters such as vampires, werewolves, flesh-eating zombies and other supervillains have enjoyed a renaissance in popular teen culture. Indeed, there are similarities between antisocial teens and these fictionalised creatures. And it would be foolish to deny the existence of an animal instinct, with which many troubled adolescents appear to be driven. But we must not confuse behaviour and identity. These adolescents were not *born* evil. The 'monstrous' behaviour exhibited by challenging young people often conceals a deep and painful emotional wound;

just like the mythical monster, they are a product of neglect, abandonment and abuse.

From whence cometh the beast or supervillain?

The Beast Folks on *The Island of Dr Moreau*², along with Dr Victor Frankenstein's uncivilised creature³, and more recently Dren from the movie *Splice*⁴, highlight that monsters are not born, they are manufactured. Whether created by a self-centred, narcissistic scientist in a bleak laboratory, or by a morally ambiguous geneticist in Dr Moreau's House of Pain, it is the parental failure of their creators and society's prejudice that turn the creatures into monsters.

It is easy to look at these fictional monsters and only see destructive forces driven by animal instinct. But it is important to remember their origins: victims rejected by their creators, deprived of the most basic human needs, and equipped with no other developmental skills than an innate instinct to survive. The similarities to the background of the antisocial adolescent are obvious: 'monstrous' behaviour triggered by a troubled background, raging against society, and surviving on a diet of omnipotence.

A more contemporary and notorious fictional character, who shares similar characteristics with both the mythical monster and the troubled teen, is the ever-present superhero, or, to be more precise, his angry counterpart: the supervillain.

An exploration of these characters' origins always reveals a painful truth hidden to others, distressing details of a traumatic past, and a childhood tainted by abandonment, loss, isolation, and emotional deprivation.

But unlike his mighty counterpart who worked through his trauma and became enriched with a deeper level of awareness, the supervillain never had the opportunity to merge with the warmth of a good-enough other and heal his wounds. Instead, he remains stuck in the nightmare of his painful past. From the sinister Darth Vader to the sadistic Joker (Batman's nemesis), the supervillain's alliance with the darker side, his need to constantly disrupt social order, and his rigidly worn mask are nothing but a false front, an omnipotent and domineering façade that hides any trace of vulnerability, allowing

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him to conceal his real identity and thus protecting his Self from further potentially traumatic and painful experiences. Sadly, like the antisocial adolescent, the archaic coping strategies upon which the supervillain relies obscure his view of the world and cut him off from sources of support and emotional closeness.

Arguably the most famous angry superhero, and definitely one of the most popular with teenagers, is The Incredible Hulk. Originally inspired by the narratives of both *Frankenstein* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the graphic novel of the The Incredible Hulk⁵ and, more recently, the Ang Lee movie⁶ both tell the story of Bruce Banner, a socially inept scientist who, after being exposed to gamma radiation, transforms into a raging green behemoth each time he feels threatened. Frequent flashbacks, though, show a haunted past full of domestic violence, and severe physical abuse. Thus, the gamma rays are not solely responsible for his unstoppable rage but merely amplify the fear and hurt Banner experienced during his early life.

Again, like the antisocial adolescent, this fictional green monster is not just a mindless savage, but a wounded survivor and a misunderstood outcast unleashing his inner beast whenever he is reminded of the unbearable feelings of insecurity and vulnerability he experienced in his early years. His rage is not the rage of a monster, but that of a vulnerable, frightened and helpless child. It is the rage to feel alive, a desperate way of coercing others into a) helping him heal his wounds and b) providing him with the parenting he never received.

So the journey and the hurt of the monster parallel in many ways the experiences of the antisocial adolescent. And the increasing presence of such creatures in youth culture provides us with a valuable tool for finding a way into the troubled adolescent's inner world and helping him return to a more creative way of living.

'Omnipotent Self' versus 'Wounded Self'

As we have seen, the monsters on our screens thrive on a seemingly inexhaustible supply of omnipotence that drives them to boundless destruction. Yet, when we look at the backgrounds of these creatures, we can see that these gruesome displays of omnipotence are nothing but the outgrowth of a painful past. The antisocial teen also shares this desire for omnipotence, a mask of power that he puts on when he feels threatened. Deprived of love, safety and warmth in his formative years, it is as if the challenging adolescent had no other option but to bury the more vulnerable parts of his Self – his Wounded Self – and, in order to survive, learn to rely on a substitute: an illusory, powerful Omnipotent Self.

'I was the slave, not the master, of an impulse, which I detested, yet could not disobey ... I had cast off all feelings,' laments Dr Frankenstein's creature⁵. Similarly, for most troubled teens, their monstrous behaviour is nothing but the remnants of a traumatic early history when the world only contained two polarised positions: strong and all-powerful, or weak and helpless.

The child deprived of love, empathetic attunement and appropriate maternal care experiences acute helplessness. In the process, he develops a fearful view of the world, which he perceives as being populated by dangerous creatures, where the weak is at the mercy of the strong. In such a Darwinian world, he quickly learns that the only way to survive is by being on top of the food chain, a king amongst beasts. But there is a price to be paid to attain such a powerful position. In order to survive, he must tuck away key elements of his real Self, the parts that have not been welcomed by others and that he perceives as shameful and too weak to survive in such an oppressive world. In other words, his vulnerable, needy and love-seeking Wounded Self.

Unable to escape from the harsh reality in which he's living, the frightened and emotionally starved child takes refuge in fantasy. He lays aside his need to love and be loved, banishes his relational needs to an emotional wasteland, and, to compensate, unconsciously signs over all control to a mighty inner rescuer, a controlling and false Omnipotent Self.

Once 'he' has been invited in, this Omnipotent Self takes over the inner world and quickly builds emotional contact boundaries that protect the child against further potential hurt, rejection or humiliation. This is a relief for the terrified child, as, through this alliance, he gains the illusion of safety, believing his powerful new-found saviour will protect him against the evil of his world.

But this is nothing more than a Faustian bargain, for his survival has been purchased at an extravagant price: the inability to live a full and creative life. The Omnipotent Self initially provides a source of comfort for the frightened child, and allows him to survive emotional starvation and intense distress; but in exchange, he demands total control, forbidding relational needs, while keeping the wounded parts of the individual well hidden under a cloak of shame.

So, in order to survive, the child not only disowns aspects of his Self and surrenders to a more Omnipotent Self, but he also internalises the oppression he experiences. Like the mythical vampire (or werewolf) whose 'birth' originates from an abuse of power and contamination, the child's Wounded Self is banished to the darkest pit of the psyche, while the Omnipotent Self gradually identifies with the 'monster' to whom the child had originally



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fallen prey. In other words, the spirit of the abuser finds its way inside, invading the child's inner world, where he subordinates, controls and oppresses the vulnerable aspects of the Self.

Needless to say, the Omnipotent Self and the Wounded Self do not work as a team; they are essentially a match made in hell, dividing the psyche, and creating inner and outer conflicts for the adolescent (and those of us around him), as his early relationship dynamics get replayed internally and externally in a world which he still believes to be a hostile place populated by heartless people.

So, while the Omnipotent Self is labelled dangerous, soulless and evil by society, the Wounded Self of the traumatised adolescent remains unseen by the world, undeveloped, frozen in a state of suspended animation, yet still longing to be recovered and gently warmed back to life by a strong, confident and caring other.

How do we befriend the beast?

It is not surprising, therefore, that the antisocial adolescent relates so strongly to the fictional creatures that frequently appear on our screen. But they share more than just a label and a painful past: they both seem to embody contrasting values. Vampires, werewolves, the Minotaur, the Gorgon and many others are anthropomorphic creatures, half human and half beast, dwelling in the murky region between animal and man, and, like the untamed adolescent, it is their wild animal side that is in charge, undermining the shamed and wounded aspects of the Self while forcefully dictating the individual's behaviour. In other words, the tormented, cursed and emotionally starved individual submits to the will of the wild beast, or Omnipotent Self, while, for the sake of survival, his aching Wounded Self remains hidden.

Yet, in spite of his dictatorial regime, the Omnipotent Self's only agenda is to protect its wounded counterpart. So he acts as a fierce sentinel, a mighty Cerberus, highly vigilant, ready to attack anybody whose behaviour resembles that of the original abuser or the dynamics that were played out in the individual's early environment. This means that he must never allow anybody to get too close to the fragile Wounded Self for fear that the hurt and humiliation experienced in the past might find its way into the present. Any breach in the relative sense of security the Omnipotent Self has established automatically triggers an alarm that is promptly answered, giving rise to a protective aggressive response.

It can therefore be seen that the relational dynamics of the inner selves of the adolescent parallel those of a hostage situation, with the Omnipotent Self in the role of the hostage-taker,

and the Wounded Self as the hostage. This implies that, in order to build a relationship with the Omnipotent abductor and eventually open the lines of communication with the captive Wounded Self, we need to model our approach to that of a hostage negotiator.

Hostage negotiation

The basic principles of hostage negotiation⁷ can be applied when forming a working alliance with the troubled teen. As in any real hostage situation, a rapport must be built with the hostage taker or Omnipotent Self in order to bring about a successful result.

If we adopt the role of punitive authority figure, call in the SWAT team, and rush in all guns blazing⁸, our intervention is likely to turn into a bloody rescue mission and inevitably do more damage than good. Our initial goal should be to establish a climate of understanding and trust before any meaningful dialogue can take place. In other words, our role is that of a hostage negotiator, and as negotiator we must fight our inner urge to act out our own impulses, and demonstrate that we are not only robust enough to validate the adolescent's omnipotent fantasies, withstand attacks and survive intense feelings, but also vulnerable enough to invite a meaningful relationship.

Of course, like any negotiation, it will take time, effort, courage, and considerable resilience in order to befriend the hostage-taker or Omnipotent Self and build a relationship of trust with the troubled adolescent. However, if we create a holding environment; acknowledge and validate the adolescent's initial resistance to our attempts at communication; regulate our own impulses to punish, surrender, ignore or rescue; and instead remain firm, fair and grounded when under attack, we stand a good chance of fulfilling our mission and eventually of being allowed free – or at least 'supervised' – access to the Wounded Self. This in turn will allow both the Omnipotent Self and the captive Wounded Self to cooperate in relation to us, and gradually, we can hope, with each other.

The monster metaphor

Of course, our initial interactions with the omnipotent hostage taker are not likely to go smoothly. The adolescent under the spell of his omnipotent fantasies has learned to depend on a very rigid attitude; he is defended against openness, exploration or intimacy. He perceives everything and everyone as a potential threat and he is entirely opposed to allowing adults into his world or openly discussing his experiences with us. Revealing the existence of his survival kit and exposing his vulnerable Wounded Self is a risk he is highly unlikely to take.

However, metaphors, analogies, and symbolic expression allow us to safely sneak through the protective rampart and gently peel away the layers he has wrapped around his hurt. Metaphors provide the adolescent with an indirect and non-threatening way of sharing aspects of his inner world without us being directly subjected to the aggressive and dictatorial interferences of his Omnipotent Self.

The challenging adolescent intuitively understands the concept of symbolic expression, and instinctively relates to the monster metaphor, not only because it loudly echoes his experiences and the fragmented and chaotic nature of his inner world, but also because it empowers him. The monster metaphor provides the adolescent with some healthy distance from his personal history; moreover, it allows him to articulate his terrifying past experiences, share aspects of his inner landscape, voice his hurt, and fully express his fears and his deepest yearnings while saving face.

Thus, the fictional monster is not only an epitome of lawlessness and a symbol for the loneliness of the aching soul concealed beneath layers of shame and hurt, but also a metaphor of transformation, a symbol of togetherness, and a sign of hope. By exploring the polarities inherent in the myth of this ambiguous creature in our practice⁹, we can help the adolescent to reconnect and safely acknowledge feelings and thoughts he had been defended against, develop empathy for the un-lived part of his psyche, narrow the gap between his divided selves, support him in connecting the seemingly unconnected, and gradually bring about healing and reconciliation in his internal world.

Conclusion

On old maps, cartographers used to mark obscure and uncharted territories with the words *Hic monstra sunt – Here be monsters*, together with sketches of formidable imaginary creatures. This primeval fear of the unknown still influences the way in which we look at ourselves and others, and has a big part to play in the sometimes negative way in which challenging adolescents are perceived.

Like the mythical monster, the feral adolescent is not only misunderstood but also demonised by society, branded with hurtful labels and epithets that achieve nothing except to confirm his early imprinted and long-held belief that he is unwanted, unlovable and an outcast. With such developmental and societal conditioning, it is no wonder that the adolescent comes to define himself as evil, which inevitably increases the likelihood that he will engage in antisocial behaviour. So rather than joining the angry mob and baying for blood, we must aim to provide the challenging youth with the parenting he never received.

Haunted by the ghost of his past, and stuck in a permanent state of hypervigilance, while concealing his aching Wounded Self behind layers of self-protection, the dynamics played within the adolescent's inner world dramatically echo Winnicott's¹⁰ belief that sometimes to hide is a necessary evil, but to never be found is a catastrophe. Thus, the antisocial adolescent is not a soulless savage – his reality is just different from ours. He is a survivor, desperately trying to find a strong and caring other: one who will be robust enough to venture into his inner world, face his persecutory inner figure, and, like Winnicott's good-enough mother, help to facilitate his omnipotent fantasies and, ultimately, find the beauty within the beast. For as Dr Frankenstein's creature painfully confesses: 'The love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes.' ■

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